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Men—Not Monuments

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A teacher's affirmation of individual freedom. Moral choices belong to man, not the "system," says the writer, pleading for more inner, less outer direction.

This is my tenth year at the University of Chicago, four years longer than I ever stayed put before. At periodic intervals I am surprised even now to find myself a professor at a university which Robert Hutchins once described as: "not a good university, simply the best." In less humble moments, however, I sometimes think my experience in other than academic worlds gives me standards of judgment which the purely academic man does not have.

For example, I once thought all Ph.D.'s were definitely brilliant—intellectual luminaries in the dark skies of mental mediocrity. Now I think that the degree is more often than not a mark of persistence not unrelated to the ability of students to give their professors what they want. Perhaps this is a part of the vocationalism which makes a Ph.D. so necessary for those who aspire to college and university teaching. Recognizing this to be true, I sometimes encourage my students to earn their degrees as quickly and painlessly as possible and then go about getting their education. In my more cynical moments I compare a Ph.D. to a card in Petrillo's union of musicians and remark: "Membership doesn't mean greater ability to play the flute, only more opportunities."

Increasingly, securing an education means specialization, and I do not believe in specialization. My bias is in favor of a liberal education in the humanities and social sciences which demands that each individual develop his own intellectual synthesis. The educated man, I am convinced, is he who can select from the welter of conflicting philosophies one which is to him reasonable and true, and then defend it.

When I was in the field of labor organization, I preferred individuals who were not overly specialized. Given a knowledge of sources, the ability to organize knowledge and the rarest of all qualities—the ability to exercise judgment—the individual can be specialized on the job.

Actually I found it comparatively easy to find Ph.D.'s who could count the milk bottles in Alequippa, Pennsylvania and correlate them with milk consumption. The jobs that were hard to fill were those which demanded more imaginative qualities. For example, good pamphleteers were almost impossible to find. Probably because pamphleteering demands intellectual integration, facility in expression, plus commitment.

X ☆ Universities and colleges produce more "bricklayers" than writers. Their papers and theses are built by taking one fact from one book, another from a second, still another from a third, and then reassembling them. When I find an exciting, creative writer, I am tempted to keep him locked up as a natural resource. Pamphleteering demands conviction—a willingness to take a position and defend it. The convinced cannot make objectivity an absolute. Nor—and I am convinced of this—can any honest man. Nevertheless empiricism in the social sciences increasingly demands detachment. Increasingly, too, the statisticians are corrupting the study of man. To worshipers at the altar of science, in more and more professions, truth becomes a matter of evidence, not emotion. My bias is of course the opposite. Man is more, much more than a decimal point; and subjective, indeed intuitive, truth is also valid. For example, I would ask my students to read mobility studies and sample voting behavior; but I would insist they read Stendahl's *The Red and the Black* and *The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens*. And if they had more than one class with me, I would ask them to ride street cars and study man in his natural habitat.

I begin every quarter's teaching with a lecture called "A Confession of Bias," then follow it by overtly stating mine and asking any student who wishes to leave to feel free to do so. A few have. This is my more sophisticated understanding of "letting your yea be yea and your nay be nay." Because I believe in my own freedom to express my opinions I try to develop students who are willing to express theirs. Therefore, I insist on knowing each student. My philosophy is simple and clearly stated: "A student is more important than a footnote." As I believe this, my office door is always open. Almost without exception, I am in personal rapport with my students. With many I am on a first-name basis. Status and titles do not bother me, for I am convinced that a respect based solely on degrees and titles is shallow indeed. This is the reason I am so troubled by the emphasis on externals now prevalent in modern Brethren and other former fellowship circles. In the clearest possible language I prefer to be Kermit Eby, man, rather than Kermit Eby, sym-

bol. Always recognizing, I might add, how important symbols are to those who are dependent on externals.

And again, I ask my students not to review a book but to carry on a conversation with the author. And what trouble so many have! To them the written word is truth, something to be accepted, not to be argued with; and this is doubly so when the works have become classics. My task therefore is cut out for me: I must teach a healthy irreverence to break the magic spell cast over all those who are inclined to believe that because it is in print it must necessarily be the truth. More than once students have asked me if I am trying to trick them into making a mistake. They just do not believe I want them to be intellectually free. Or, as they tell me—even here at Chicago—conformity not individualism is rewarded. However, by the end of the quarter most of them are convinced.

Instead of giving written exams I ask each student to come to my office or home for an hour-and-a-half-long conversation. Of course this takes energy, and to be frank, as I get older, more than I sometimes think I have. But as my wife insists, if I am doing God's work, He will supply the energy.

In a sense I have come full cycle. I began in a world of the face-to-face ethic and am ending the same way. During the 25-year interval mine was the world of pamphlet and committee. But before someone too hastily assumes I have abandoned organizational responsibility, I must assert that my chief intellectual preoccupation is determining how to give meaning to the Judeo-Christian ethic, a face-to-face ethic which nurtured me in face-to-face relationships in a world increasingly complex and with decision ever farther removed. Also in the world of politics and power I affirm man, insisting that it is not that I am so good but that some are so awful. But enough of this. I am only doing what I believe to be the greatest necessity of our era—*affirming man*—protesting, and protesting forever, that man, imaginative and creative, is more important than any system. Actually there are times when I think that system is becoming more and more man's enemy.

And now let me illustrate by citing examples from my experience as a circuit rider in the ranks of the ministry. Time and again, probably because I am outside the bureaucratic structure and have a bit of a reputation for intellectual nonconformity, ministers pour out their doubts to me:

I so wanted to be a prophet. The ministry was once a calling, a dedication,

and now it has become a routine. Housekeeping takes all my time. I am forever involved in teas and budgets. I haven't time to read or study. My sermons are uninspired. In order to get along, to support my hostages to fortune, I must conform.

And yet another:

Why, oh why, is it so much easier to get a big pile of masonry built than a staff to operate it? Air conditioners instead of educational directors; kitchens nicely furnished instead of competent secretaries; *monuments* instead of *men*.

And what I have heard said about bishops and headquarters would be heresy if repeated. There is smoldering resentment against the everlasting superimposition of special days and special materials. "When, oh when," one minister said, "will there be a Sunday all my own?"

To these my reply is always:

Men are more important than monuments, and if you believe it, you must affirm your belief by behaving as if you did, even though you cease being a good organization man. The first step in recapturing your freedom is to be willing to behave as if losing your security made no difference.

Perhaps the time has arrived to assert that all men who wish to be free to speak their minds should know how to use their hands. Why shouldn't intellectuals learn a trade? And perhaps our Brethren-Mennonite farmer-ministers, whose living was independent of their brethren, had an advantage in that their bread and butter was not threatened. I am sure the rabbis of earlier times who worked as they taught were freer men than their modern descendants, and most certainly their parables were more relevant. Nor is it an accident that the most charismatic men in America are to be found in Negro pulpits. These are times when I am convinced that the farmer-ministers of fifty years ago preached more relevant sermons than the theologically abstracted ones with present-day seminary training.

But enough before I make more enemies! On the other hand, why worry? The illustrations my grandfather used grew out of his world, but his world has passed. Today we are more and more being assimilated into the industrial matrix. Our soil is the city. And, may I add, a soil which historical protestantism has not learned to cultivate. Protestantism, as I know it, is suburban. Its God is a Rotarian, and many of its ministers are at home in gray flannel suits and know how to use the promoter's language. The soil I speak of, the city heartland, is being

cultivated by Jehovah's Witnesses and pentecostal churches. Perhaps this is to be expected, since there are those who argue that institutions, like men, rise and live their day. Nevertheless, I wish the Brethren Seminary¹ would remain where it belongs instead of moving to some suburban paradise. For at present Bethany is located where the world we are called upon to save is just outside the door. But it may be that we too prefer salesmen to saints.

Probably what I am insisting on for others is a reaffirmation that the ultimate loyalties of every minister must be to commitment, not to system. Or to concretize, I always found it easy to work for an organization when my loyalty was to a vision of the kingdom, which transcended my loyalty to men in a power structure. Incidentally, it is exactly here where corruption enters the labor movement, for it is here where the union ceases to be a movement and the dominant motive becomes gain instead of service. And I suppose here is where religion becomes religiosity and secularism transcends dedication.

Everything that I have written up to now can be expressed in a reaffirmation of my belief that "ultimate moral choices are personal." Again, to illustrate, I could write an entire book explaining the social conditions which produced Dave Beck, insisting, as I do, that he is the true result of the business mores which produced him. Nevertheless he is guilty of theft, and doubly guilty, because unions are service, not business, institutions. Nor are churches precisely community centers or physical education plants or even kitchens. They are religious institutions dedicated to answering the important questions of man's nature and destiny.

I am therefore not only *affirming man*, but a particular kind of man, an inner-directed man, a man with a built-in plumb line, one who is conscious of the necessities of compromise but who is also wise enough to understand that a man who is a man at all must at some time stand outside of compromise, outside of history. Here is the point where education is as much of the heart as of the head.

For those who wish to have a clearer picture of what I mean, I would suggest reading the history of the American soldiers who defected to the communists in Korea, as reported in *The New Yorker*. If there is any moral in the story it is that many of these were men who felt no responsibility to their fellow man because they had no clear image of what being a man meant. To me this is stark tragedy, for I am interested in the heroic, in man who transcends even what is expected of him. Per-

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